



Meet the Desert Fox in the Box: Algeria striker Rafik Djebbour

It is 24 years since Algeria last qualified for a World Cup and now having done so at the expense of bitter rivals Egypt, the Desert Foxes face the challenge of qualifying from a tough Group C which includes England, Slovenia and the USA. To succeed they'll need the power and goals of AEK Athens striker Rafik Djebbour. Talking exclusively to Pumafootball.com following a Les Fennecs training session in Germany, the French-born forward talks frankly about the team's World Cup tactics, the dark side of football and why Wayne Rooney is a typical Algerian!

Hi Rafik, how are your preparations for the World Cup going?

We are preparing for our first world cup in 24 years. It's a big challenge but we are in good condition after altitude training in Switzerland.

You've just suffered a big defeat by Ireland in a friendly. Is that cause for concern?

This game was complicated because we were tired from training in Switzerland and then we had to travel to Ireland so our legs were a little heavy. The coach tried a new tactic and many new players so we were under our usual level but this is normal and we don't need to be afraid of anything because we are just preparing.

Has this affected your confidence?

No. Of course the best way is to win but were still preparing and we still have 10 days to prepare.

What kind of tactics was the coach trying out?

It was 4-3-1-2 using a no.10 behind the strikers but we didn't have a good feeling to play in this way.

It was the 20-year-old from Sochaux, Ryad Boudabouz, playing in the hole. He is the youngest player in the squad - how is he coping with the pressure?

To play for a club and the national team are two very different things in terms of pressure so we try and protect him.

How big a blow was it to lose Mourad Meghni?

He's an important piece of the team. He's someone who can put the foot on the ball and has a superb pass – kind of like Zidane. But we have quality players who can take his place such as Karim Ziani. He can cope with the pressure of the fans and the big tournament.

We saw in training that Ziani is hugely competitive. He doesn't even like to lose a game of volley ball. What's he like to play with?

This is typical of Algerian players – he plays with emotion. This is our style – we like to play with passion and emotion and we'll do everything to win. He loves to win and he's a big player for us.

This passion got out of hand against Egypt at the Cup of Nations. Is discipline a problem for Algeria?

Yes, we've had problems in the past and a little now too. We have to keep control of our emotions. If we get the feeling that we haven't been treated fairly sometimes we can lose our concentration but I

think we are learning and this will not happen again. But to be honest with you the games against Egypt are not like other games so maybe that's why some players got nervous.

Conversely, the performance in the Cup of Nations quarter-final victory over Ivory Coast was incredible. Which Algeria will we see at the World Cup: the one who defied the odds to beat Ivory Coast or the one which lost its discipline against Egypt?

We like to say that Algeria give everything or nothing. We can beat a team 3-0 or we can lose 3-0; nothing in the middle. This comes from concentration - if we concentrate and work together we will see the team that beat Ivory Coast. If we lose concentration you will see the team which lost to Egypt.

Algeria are considered the weakest team in Group C. Is that fair?

It's difficult to compare because we've never played these teams but I believe we can be the second team in this group. England have top players but we have a chance with USA and Slovenia because we are stronger than them.

What are your ambitions going into the England game?

We have to be realistic – it's a big footballing nation but we're not afraid of anyone. I hope we'll get a result. We have to be ambitious because if you're not ambitious you miss your chance. We've seen in the past that many teams have caused a surprise so why not Algeria too?

Are you suggesting you'll be going into the game playing attacking football?

When I say ambition what I mean is that we have to feel like we can win - and only then we can make something happen. Without ambition you just sit and wait and then nothing happens.

Who are England's most dangerous players?

I think Rooney – he is a fighter. In a way he's a typical Algerian player; he's strong and has a super finish – he'll be very difficult to keep quiet. Then of course you have Lampard who can shoot from anywhere and make the difference. Gerrard is a similar player. These three can bring danger from nowhere so we have to concentrate to get a result.

As a striker you'll be facing Terry and Ferdinand. What do you make of their defensive partnership?

It will be a very big test for me to play against these top defenders plus Ashley Cole and Glen Johnson who are among the best in their positions in the world. England also have great pace on the wings and they a fantastic coach too.

What do you think are England's weaknesses?

On every part of the pitch they have fantastic players but they don't have a top class goalkeeper. They also don't play nice football so perhaps if we keep the ball it will be complicated for them too. We won't have many chances against England and so when we do we'll have to be deadly.

Algeria have struggled for goals: none in the last four games. What are you doing to improve that hit-rate?

This is something we are working on. I did not participate in those first two games but then I played against Serbia and Ireland. The coach is trying to play with two strikers now to improve our finishing.

We look for each other on the pitch and try to be more creative and more deadly. It is still difficult but we are working on it– this week is all about tactics so we will try to improve our finishing.

So what tactics do you think you'll play at the World Cup?

I'm not sure how the coach wants us to play. It could be 4-4-2, 3-5-2 or 4-5-1 – we will see.

You know all about the England team. How much do you know about Slovenia and USA?

We saw USA play in the Confederations Cup against Italy. They play nice football and are full of running. They have two or three players who can make the difference like Donovan, Dempsey and Altidore but they are more a team than about individuality and that will make them difficult to play against. But it is a team that we have to get something from because against England will be very difficult.

Slovenia is your first game. What do you know about them?

I only know a little. In the past they played at the World Cup with Yugoslavia. I know that teams from this region are strong, they're fighters and they play nice football. So I think it will be a tough game, too.

Realistically, how far do you think Algeria can go in this World Cup?

You know the magic of football can you take you far! But our first target is to qualify from the group stage – this would be fantastic. Then we can see how far we can go.

If you do qualify from the group you could face Germany in the second round. How do you feel about this considering the history between the two sides? [Algeria beat West Germany 2-1]

We can make a remake! It was fantastic but what of course we remember from this game is what happened next between Germany and Austria [the two European conspired to play out a draw to ensure they both qualified instead of Algeria]. This is the dark side of football and it caused a lot of pain for a generation in Algeria. I'm sure that if this had not happened then Algeria could have progressed with players going to bigger clubs and then bringing that mentality back to Algeria. Many people still remember '82. Germany was like today's Spain and for a young team to beat them was incredible.

Like you, a lot of Algerian players were born in France and could have played for Les Bleus but chose Algeria instead. Why is that?

When you're Algerian you keep the feeling of Algeria. Look at Zidane who played most of his career for France but then when he finishes he comes back to Algeria because of the feeling in his blood. But sure some people choose because they see they have a better chance of playing for Algeria than France.

So, what does your future hold after the World Cup?

I'm just concentrating on the World Cup but after that I think it's time for me to leave Greece. I have one year left on my contract but I'm 26 and I would like to move to a bigger championship. This winter I was very close to going to Germany but my club refused to sell me so I hope to have a good World Cup and entertain a lot of people.